

in flight, limbs are empty—
eyes dissolve in brightness, lemon light

clouds dive and roar, raw heat stings

and the air around him slings
(leaping with shining water
racing, chasing the sun)

Icarus can fly—why does he need wings?

TRACKING DOWN THE MYTH

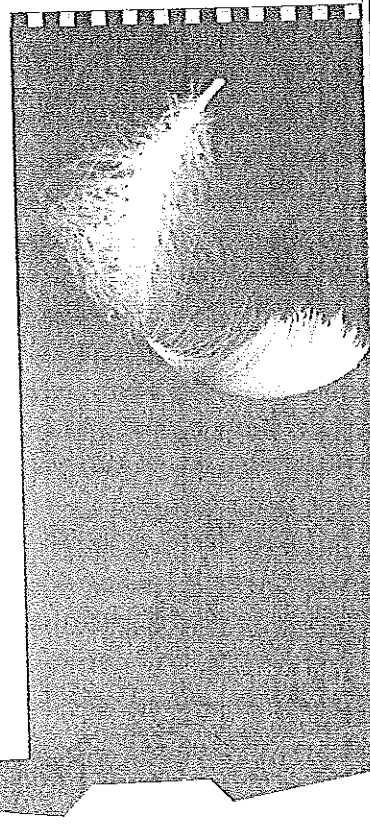
The myth of Icarus is so widespread that it seems to pop up everywhere—in stories, in poems, in paintings, in dance, in comic books, in movies. The first thing you will do in this investigation is to look at the story that is the basis for Harriet Archer's poem.

The earliest known version of the myth is in Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, although there are earlier references to it. They are found on vases and wall carvings that predate Ovid, who was born in 43 BCE. All writers since Ovid have based their versions on his. After Ovid, the best-known version is the well-known account of the fall of Icarus, told by Thomas Bulfinch in the nineteenth century. This is the basic story found in Bulfinch's collection of myths, *The Age of Fable*.

Before you read the story of Icarus as told by Thomas Bulfinch, recall what you and your partner shared about the myth prior to reading "Before the Fall." After you read each paragraph of the story, jot a little note to remind yourself of what happened. When you read your notes all together, you should be able to retell the story.

The Basic Story told by Thomas Bulfinch

Icarus was imprisoned with his father Daedalus in a tower on Crete by the king Minos. Daedalus, who was known for his creativity and inventions, figured out how to escape from the tower. He knew he could not leave the island by sea, as the king kept strict watch on all the vessels, and permitted none to sail without being carefully searched. "Minos may control the land and sea," said Daedalus, "but not the regions of the air. I will try that way." So he set to work to fabricate wings for himself and his young son Icarus. He put feathers together beginning with the smallest and adding larger, so as to form an increasing surface. The larger ones he secured with thread and the smaller with wax, and gave the whole a gentle curvature like the wings of a bird. Icarus, the boy, stood and looked on, sometimes running to gather up



Response Notes

the feathers which the wind had blown away, and then handling the wax and working it over with his fingers, by his play impeding his father in his labors.

When at last the work was done, Daedalus the artist, waving his wings, found himself buoyed upward and hung suspended, poising himself on the updraft of air. He next fitted wings on his son's arms and shoulders in the same manner, and taught him how to fly, as a bird tempts her young ones from the lofty nest into the air. When all was prepared for flight, he said, "Icarus, my son, I charge you to keep at a moderate height, for if you fly too low the dampness will clog your wings, and plunge you into the ocean. And if you fly too high, the heat will melt them. Keep near me and you will be safe." While he gave him these instructions and fitted the wings to his shoulders, the face of the father was wet with tears, and his hands trembled. He hugged the boy, not knowing that it was for the last time. Then rising on his wings he flew off, encouraging Icarus to follow, and looked back from his own flight to see how his son managed his wings. As they flew, the plowman in the field stopped his work to gaze, and the shepherd leaned on his staff and watched them, astonished at the sight, and thinking they were gods who could thus fly like the birds through the air.

They passed small islands on the left and a larger one on the right, then the boy, exulting in his joyous flight, began to leave the guidance of his father and soar upward as if to reach heaven. The nearness of the blazing sun softened the wax which held the feathers together, and they began to fall off. He fluttered with his arms, but no feathers remained to hold the air. While his mouth uttered cries to his father, he plummeted; and the sound was submerged in the blue waters of the sea. His father cried, "Icarus, Icarus, where are you?" At last he saw the feathers floating on the water, and bitterly lamenting his own skill that had fashioned the wings, he buried the body. The sea was thenceforth called the Icarian Sea in honor of his name. And Daedalus called the land where he was buried Icaria in memory of his child. Daedalus himself arrived safely in Sicily, where he built a temple to Apollo, and hung up his wings, an offering to the god. ❖

❖ Since this version was written by Thomas Bulfinch more than a century ago, you may have found some words with which you were unfamiliar. List those words here:

Vocabulary Words

Definitions

